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## [In the Shadows of Revolt: Hungarian Relief, the U.S. Navy and Humanitarian Assistance during the Cold War Part I](#)

Filed under [Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief](#), [Navy History](#), [Navy Medicine History](#) {[no comments](#)}



During the Cold War, it can be said that the very term “refugee” was almost entirely synonymous with the fight against Communism.

By André B. Sobocinski, BUMED Historian

*“I urge in the name of humanity and in the cause of peace that the Soviet Union take action to withdraw*

*forces from Hungary immediately and to permit the Hungarian people to enjoy and exercise ... human rights and fundamental freedoms.”*

~[President Dwight D. Eisenhower](#), November 1956

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Fifty nine years ago, Lt. Betty Nimits was in her second year as chief nurse aboard USNS General George Randall when her ship was assigned to transport some of the thousands of Hungarian refugees to the United States. “I thought here are men and women who gave up everything they knew and owned for the chance of a new beginning,” Nimits would remember. “Our job was to bring them to the United States and provide medical services in transit.”(1)

Nimits and her shipmates distributed toys to the children, and toiletry items to the adults courtesy of the American Red Cross. They attended to the passengers’ minor medical complaints like seasickness and colds, and tried to boost morale of a people who had given up all of their material possessions in exchange for freedom. After nearly a two-week voyage across the Atlantic, the Randall landed in New York and its compliment of “refugees” were transported to a relocation camp in New Jersey. Nimits would never see them again.



After nearly a two-week voyage across the Atlantic, the Randall landed in New York and its compliment of “refugees” were transported to a relocation camp in New Jersey.

During the [Cold War](#), it can be said that the very term “refugee” was almost entirely synonymous with the fight against Communism. From the end of World War II through the fall of the “Iron Curtain,” the United States opened its doors to more than four million Eastern Europeans, Cubans, Vietnamese, Chileans, and other refugees fleeing from the Soviet Union and/or socialist threats. (2) Throughout it all the U.S. military was called upon to provide medical services to these [Cold War](#) refugees. [Navy Military Sealift Command \(MSC\)](#) ships like the Randall would serve as vehicles of hope for many of these

displaced populations. (3)

## The Hungarian Revolt

During the 1950s, the growing “discontent over economic stagnation, intellectual suppression, and political tyranny” in Eastern Bloc nations bubbled over into massive protests. (4) In June 1956, factory workers in Poznan, Poland, rioted, demanding better working conditions. The protests led the Polish communist party to moderate some of its restrictive policies and institute a more reform-minded leader to the helm. (5)

In October 1956, in solidarity with the Polish plight, many Hungarian students began protesting for independence, free elections, the end of Soviet political control, and exploitation in their own country. (6) The demonstrations would soon turn violent when Hungarian police and later Soviet Union troops began firing into crowds, leading to a veritable uprising and one of the bloodiest chapters in the [Cold War](#). (7) On November 1, Soviet Union troops poured into Budapest, the nation’s capital, to crush the rebellion. An estimated 3,000 Hungarians were killed and more than 13,000 were wounded. Over 160,000 Hungarians fled the country, many settling in Austria and Yugoslavia.



In October 1956, in solidarity with the Polish plight, many Hungarian students began protesting for independence, free elections, the end of Soviet political control, and exploitation in their own country.

[President Dwight Eisenhower](#) called for immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary and vowed that the U.S. would play a role in humanitarian relief for the refugees. On December 12, 1956, the [Eisenhower Administration](#) established the Hungarian Refugee Relief Committee to coordinate humanitarian relief and resettlement. Processing points in Austria were established to handle U.S. bound refugees. (8) The “refugee crisis,” as it was termed, forced U.S. policy makers to look at its immigration policy and come to an agreement on how many refugees would be granted asylum and, ultimately, citizenship. Tracy Voorhees, Chairman of the newly formed committee, would state that “America has got to make good on this. We can’t fail if 165,000,000 Americans can’t take care of 21,500 refugees, a great many of whom are heroes.”(9)



The army barracks at Camp Kilmer near New Brunswick, N.J. was designated as the refugee and processing camp.

The army barracks at Camp Kilmer near New Brunswick, N.J. was designated as the refugee and processing camp and the [Navy](#), in coordination with the Air Force, was assigned with leading the air-sea lift. Ships would set sail in five day intervals. The USNS Leroy Eltinge, the first transport to take part in the effort, departed Bremerhaven December 20, 1956.

### Endnotes:

(1) Interview with LCDR (ret.) Betty Nimits on April 20, 2015. BUMED Archives.

(2) Bon Temp, Carl. *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2008.

(3) In the Cold War, the Navy had been regularly engaged in humanitarian activities. Following the French Defeat at Dienbienphu the Navy hospital ship *Haven* (AH-12) transported 721 French to Marseilles, France and Oran, Algeria. Soon after, under the terms of the 1954 Geneva Accords, which ended the war between France and the Communist Viet Minh, the people of Vietnam could decide where they wished to settle. As part of Operation Passage to Freedom, the Navy would evacuate some 860,000 refugees to the South. The Navy Medical Department lead by pioneers Cmdr. Julius Amberson and Lt. Thomas Dooley would help oversee the medical relief in the refugee camps.

(4) Whelan, Joseph. *The Hungarian Revolutions of 1848 and 1956: Background Information Designed for Use in the Preparation of Anniversary Statements and Speeches*. The Library of Congress Legislative Reference Service. January 10, 1968.

(5) Wladyslaw Gomulka (1905-1982).

(6) Whelan

(7) On October 30, former communist premier Imre Nagy announced a return to political conditions that existed prior to communist seizure in 1947. There were promises of free elections, abolition of a one-party system, and negotiations for withdrawal of Soviet troops. This proved to be nothing but a hopeful

calm before a violent crackdown.

(8) Sturdevant, Robert. Hungarian Parolees on Way to U.S.: First Group in Simplified Plan. *The New York Herald Tribune*. Dec 8, 1956. Pg 7.

Jacobs, Bradford. Navy Transport on Its Way to Bring Refugees to U.S. *The Baltimore Sun*, Dec 8, 1956.

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## [In the Shadows of Revolt: Hungarian Relief, the U.S. Navy and Humanitarian Assistance in the Cold War Pt. II](#)

Filed under [Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief](#), [Military Medicine](#), [Navy History](#) {[no comments](#)}



The voyage of USNS General Leroy Eltinge (T-AP-154) represented the Navy's first effort in the massive sealift of Hungarian refugees.

*By André B. Sobocinski, BUMED Historian*

**“Today will be remembered as a day of tears for the 1,750 Hungarian Refugees who came aboard**

**the Eltinge this A.M. The tears were for thankfulness not regret. They were shared by the men of the U.S. Navy participating in this special mission ordered by President Eisenhower”**

**~ The official account of USNS Leroy Eltinge (TAP-154)**

*The Voyage of the General Eltinge*

The voyage of USNS General Leroy Eltinge (T-AP-154) represented the [Navy's](#) first effort in the massive sea lift of Hungarian refugees. (1) The former World War II troopship, had brought thousands of U.S. service personnel home from the war. In 1949, the Eltinge was one of several ships used to transport many of the Second World War's "Displaced Persons"; later the ship would carry Greek, Ethiopian and United Nation troops to Korea in 1953.



The refugees covered a wide-range of professions and backgrounds; students, professors, physicians, dentists, craftsmen, nurses, musicians, homemakers, artists, athletes, and factory workers.

On December 20 1956, 1,747 Hungarian refugees boarded the General Eltinge in Bremerhaven, Germany. (2) Some donned uniforms of the Hungarian Army, many proudly wore lapel buttons identifying them as freedom fighters. A passenger carried a Hungarian flag with a black mourning band. There were 88 children under the age of ten, almost 200 adult women, and close to 1,500 adult males. The refugees covered a wide-range of professions and backgrounds; students, professors, physicians, dentists, craftsmen, nurses, musicians, homemakers, artists, athletes, and factory workers. In the mix were engaged couples, pregnant women, and orphans. One refugee, Laszlo Donka, a 13-year old boy, fled the country after his father was killed and his mother captured by the communists. (3)

Before setting sail, messages from U.S. Consul Andrew Lynch and Vice Adm. J.M. Will, Commander of the Military Sealift Command, were read over the ship's public address system in English and Hungarian, followed by renditions of the Star Spangled Banner and "Himnusz," the Hungarian National Anthem.





On Christmas Eve, while families congregated in the dining hall, they were visited by a crew member dressed as St. Nicholas bringing refreshments and stockings full of toys and noisemakers for the children.

The Eltinge departed the following day through a heavy fog that seemed to frame the moment. On December 23, Christmas trees were set up by the crew, and mess tables were used to make streamers. On Christmas Eve, while families congregated in the dining hall, they were visited by a crewmember dressed as St. Nicholas bringing refreshments and stockings full of toys and noisemakers for the children. (4)

Rear Adm. Hubert Van Peenan, medical officer aboard this trip, noted that the passengers were relatively young, most in their early 20s. Van Peenan would write that they were “very active, excessively curious, enthusiastic, not at all timorous or depressed and their recent sufferings seemed to be repressed or forgotten. Their curiosity and motor activity soon led them swarming all over the ship and they wasted no time in reading instructions or listening to the public address system.”(5) [Navy](#) personnel later reported that those who spoke English asked “if they could help with any duties aboard ship” and even “how could they join the [Navy](#)?”





Rear Adm. Hubert Van Peenan, medical officer aboard this trip, noted that the passengers were relatively young, most in their early 20s. Van Peenan would write that they were “very active, excessively curious, enthusiastic, not at all timorous or depressed and their recent sufferings seemed to be repressed or forgotten.

Van Peenan was joined aboard the Eltinge by medical officer Lt. Melvin Borowsky, two nurses, Lt. Cmdrs. Mary Vaughan and Catherine Recicar and two WAVES Corpsmen. Medical conditions were typical for such a voyage; seasickness proved the biggest issue with 90 cases reported, resulting in the dispensing of more than 12,000 Dramamine pills. In an office memorandum entitled “A Hungarian Deluge,” from the “Brooklyn Sea Nymphs” to the “Washington Express,” Lt. Borowsky wrote, “The angry seas caused a green reflection on all Hungarian refugee faces. Many had the Elvis Presley haircut and the Rock ‘n Roll of the ship gave them the playful dance.”(6)

Other medical issues reported included upper respiratory infections, 66 cases, 66 visits, and even six admitted with gunshot wounds suffered in the revolt. A 21-year-old patient was treated for a bullet wound in his clavicle. The medical staff reported peptic conditions, epilepsy, hypertension, 350 colds, and 67 suspected cases of pulmonary tuberculosis. Several passengers were pregnant, including one in her ninth month. On the morning of January 1, 1957, the day of the ship’s arrival to the U.S., Gabriela Matusek gave birth to her first child, a 6.5 pound boy named Heinrich Tibor Matusek. He was nicknamed “Leroy” after the ship. Van Peenan, a 28-year veteran, remarked it was the first time he ever delivered a baby at sea. (7)



The *Eltinge* would offer 250 cabin spaces for families with children and an additional 1,500 troop bunks allocated for single men.

### The Hungarian Relief Operation

The [Hungarian Relief Operation](#) would mark the largest influx of [Cold War](#) refugees until the Cuban crisis beginning in the late 1950s. From December 1956 to May 1957, more than 35,000 Hungarian refugees were transported aboard 214 [Air Force Military Air Transportation Service \(MATS\)](#) flights, five [Navy MSC](#) ships, as well as 133 flights chartered by the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM). The entire relief operation saw more than 20 governmental and volunteer organizations work together to transport, provide medical care, and manage job placement and housing programs. It's estimated that the entire operation cost about \$12 million (about \$104 million in today's money).

### Endnotes

- (1) On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1956, the first Air Force flight left Munich Airport landing at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey to commence its Project Safe Haven. Some 20 Air Force MATS planes (each carrying between 58 and 72 passengers) would be diverted from their usual cargo runs.
- (2) The *Eltinge* would offer 250 cabin spaces for families with children and an additional 1,500 troop bunks allocated for single men.
- (3) Daily Account of the Navy's Hungarian Refugee Sealift, Nurse Corps Collection, Box 26, Folder 11, U.S. Navy Operational Archives.
- (4) Daily Account of the Navy's Hungarian Refugee Sealift, Nurse Corps Collection, Box 26, Folder 11, U.S. Navy Operational Archives.
- (5) Daily Account.
- (6) Brooklyn Sea Nymphs Memo. Nurse Corps Collection, Box 26, Folder 11, U.S. Navy Operational Archives.